

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US - ENGAGING OUR DEAF AND DISABLED COMMUNITIES FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL INCLUSION



Dr Tanvir Bush, Councillor at Corsham Town Council in Wiltshire, debunks myths surrounding disability issues, shares Corsham's efforts towards inclusion, and explores the transformative power of the social model of disability.

'Inclusion is not a question of political correctness. It is the key to growth' Jesse Jackson.

'It's not about the drop kerbs...it's all about the drop kerbs!' Anonymous, Corsham

I am a disabled activist and local councillor living in the Wiltshire town of Corsham and I'd like to introduce you to the idea of *transformational inclusion*. Put simply, transformational inclusion requires a mind shift from 'us and them' to just 'us' - from, 'How can we help you?' to 'How can we all help each other'?

To understand this more deeply, I'd like to bust a couple of myths, share some of the work Corsham has been undertaking and importantly, end with the social model versus the medical model of disability. Here we go!

Myth busting 1: Disability issues don't directly affect me

There are several ways of working through this – the obvious one being that to be disabled is to be human and that we all experience some form of disability in our lives at some point, be it an injury, illness or just getting older. There is no 'them' only an 'us'.

We are the largest minority group (24% of UK population) intersecting with almost all other groups in our community, i.e. there are disabled people in schools, LGBTQ + groups, sports clubs, business, academia, and among consumers, the elderly, the retired, etc. You name it, we are there! YET we are also the most over-looked and under-represented group.

Why is this when we often include engaged, adaptable and resourceful people with the potential for unique and vital community input and participation?

It's because we are too tired to participate! Deaf and disabled people often have to juggle and struggle with a plethora of other issues on top of a condition in order to manage daily life. Benefit systems can be convoluted, demeaning and difficult to navigate. Access to employment and education are impacted and additional care costs punitive. Town centres made inaccessible by not ensuring even the simplest of access requirements, eg free blue badge parking or accessible toilets, create a subtle apartheid signaling that disabled people are not welcome. That is pretty much one in five of our community being let down.

Transformational Inclusion ensures that disabled communities are involved at every level of town planning, strategy and community building from the outset - never as a retrograde or insubstantial 'add on'.

In Corsham, following a Festival of Disability and Inclusion in 2023, we now have a volunteer-run Deaf and Disabled Peoples' Organisation, supported by the town council. Strenuous efforts are made to ensure community surveys, plans and strategies are available in easy read and large print and the council continues to develop accessible materials. There has been Makaton training, and we are planning deaf awareness training, and more.

Myth busting 2: Transformational inclusion is too expensive! Learn about your 'purple pound'!

Businesses in UK lose about £2billion a month by ignoring the needs of disabled people. Whatever your high street does to make access easier will pay back in dividends.

In Corsham, the town council welcomed disabled shoppers by turning around a Wiltshire Council directive and allowing blue badge holders to park without a ticket for three hours. Every day, I meet people who benefit from this, and this means Corsham's businesses benefit too. If your town strategies and transport designs begin with inclusion at their core everyone wins.

And, finally, a reminder of the social model of disability, developed by disabled activists, and how powerful a tool this can be in transforming how we approach disability in our communities.

"The Social Model frames disability as something that is socially constructed. Disability is created by physical, organisational and attitudinal barriers and these can be changed and eliminated. This gives us a dynamic and positive model that tells us what the problem is and how to fix it. It takes us away from the position of "blaming" the individual for their shortcoming. It states that impairment is, and always will be, present in every known society, and therefore the only logical position to take, is to plan and organise society in a way that includes, rather than excludes, Disabled people." Barbara Lisicki, 2013



Additional data and resources:

- Deaf and disabled people make up to 24% of the UK's population and importantly are part of every social group, tribe, community and workplace
- The prevalence of disability rises with age: in 2021/22 around 11% of children in the UK were disabled, compared to 23% of working-age adults and 45% of adults over State Pension age. Most people aged 80 and over reported a disability (58%). NB this is pre Covid and does not include Long Covid numbers or post pandemic mental health issues
- Over one in ten people (6.9 million) in Great Britain report some kind of mobility problem and are likely to need wheelchair accessible homes, yet only 5% of homes in England can be visited by someone using a wheelchair.
- One in six disabled adults and half of all disabled children live in housing that isn't suitable for their needs
- Disabled people often incur higher fuel bills due to vulnerability to high and low temperatures, mobility aids, eg hoists and powerchairs, and additional care, diet, medical, transport and in-work support costs

Tanvir Bush is a writer, disabled activist and artist and the author of novels *Witch Girl* (Modjaji 2013) and *Cull* (Unbound 2019). She is currently based at Bath Spa University, UK, working as a Research Fellow on the Wellcome-funded 'We Are The People' project and the UKRI 'Sensing Climate' project, exploring intersections of disability, community and climate precarity. [You can find out more about her work at www.tanvirbush.com](http://www.tanvirbush.com)

References/ resources:

- https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FactSheets_TheSocialModel.pdf
- <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9602/>
- <https://wearepurple.org.uk/the-purple-pound-infographic/#:~:text=%C2%A3274%20billion%20E2%80%93%20The%20spending,per%20year%20to%20UK%20business.>

